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Hope and vision for a new west

Ed Marston
Publisher, High Country News, Paonia, CO

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Ed Marston
Publisher, *High Country News*
High Country Foundation
119 Grand Avenue
Paonia, CO 81428

I am in the enviable position of setting the stage for today and, at the end of these two sessions, bringing down the curtain. That raises the question of strategy. Should I begin by pointing out the terrible challenges we face, and then end triumphantly, after the other speakers have solved them all? Or should I start out triumphant, in the certainty that the following speakers will bring us back to reality.

It is the question I face with *High Country News* every other week. Here, we need to position ourselves for a two-day conference about natural resource issues. Similarly, the staff of *High Country News,* which is now 23 years old, needs to do the same thing over a longer period of time.

Although I was trained as a scientist, I am no longer one. I am a publisher and journalist, running a paper that has 12,500 subscribers. To hold those subscribers, and to attract more, I need to tell them a story every other week that they want to hear, or believe that they need to hear. To tell a coherent story, fortnight after fortnight, I need to be planted in this place. I have to have the broad outlines of that story in my head.

I believe that you have the same need. I believe that policy work, scientific research, or economics, is done best when the researcher understands the society and how people fit into that society. Wallace Stegner talked once of "a society to match the scenery." I want to go out on a limb and talk about the individuals who would make up such a society and what values those individuals and their society as a whole might hold.

Our children are just starting out in the world, and I am getting to watch them repeat the struggles I experienced when I was young. Like me, they are torn by high expectations, adventurousness, fear, and hostility. They are also more and more curious about their parents, as they come understand what we went through while they were children—children who were wondering why they didn't have better and more attentive parents.

When they ask how I found a career—something they are searching for—I tell them that I got into being an environmentalist because, on balance, I was a hostile, negative person, prone to believe that the world was going to hell, in large part because wrong-headed people were in charge. I was also more a second-guesser than a prime mover. I felt most comfortable explaining why something wasn't working, why it was working badly, or why it would *never* work.

As it happened, my role in the environmental movement was to publish *High Country News.* I have been doing that for a decade, as part of a mom-and-pop team, with mom the editor. We do it with a staff of ten or so, coordinating a freelance network of several hundred people, for 12,500 readers. *High Country News* is based in a little western Colorado town, and readers come through all the time, but mostly in the summer, to say hello and to see where their paper is published. They also send money, in addition to their subscription payments, so that the paper can get along without advertising. The paper is a non-profit corporation, governed by a twenty-person board from around the nation. It meets every four months in a different town, and every meeting is followed by a potluck for readers in that area. We just had one in Carson City that attracted 150 people from all over Nevada and eastern California.

Somehow, I—a negative, fault-finding loner—have become part of a wonderful community. It is a neighborhood community, where the neighborhood is the one-million square-mile West—especially its parks, wilderness, deserts. But increasingly, that community includes the West's working landscapes-irrigated fields, highway corridors, nuclear test sites, forests with roads.

The effect of this on me has been extraordinary. Although the job can be depressing—since part of *High Country News* job is to chronicle struggles to protect the West's last remaining natural places, and these fights are often lost—the wonder of the community of people who care about these places has changed me into a much more optimistic, can-do person.

As if this environmental community were not enough, two years ago I made several trips to eastern and central Oregon, to visit with ranchers in the Bend-Brothers-Burns-Steens Mountain area. The cumulative effect of those visits was to throw me into confusion. Until then, I had seen ranchers as basically one person. In theory, I knew they were individuals. But in practice, they were all the same: over six feet tall, even when they were shorter; Stetson-hatted; absolutely set in their ways; and somewhat overbearing. I also knew that as a group, they were doomed, due to their nineteenth-century values, which were inconsistent with the values I saw coming to dominate the West over the next few decades.

During those visits, however, I came to see several of the ranchers as individuals. Even worse, I came to see that we shared the same fundamental values. We differed on such things as abortion, national politics, and the war in Iraq. But we agreed about the really important thing—the West.

That discovery was profoundly unsettling. For one thing, it meant that my work as publisher of a crusading environmental newspaper would become more complex. More important, it meant that I had been blind in the past and I had seen a bland, homogeneous social landscape where there was a rich, diverse one.

These thoughts struck me most strongly on the road from Burns to the Boise airport; the first half of the trip was very painful. But about halfway to Boise, I rephrased the situation. I asked myself, *Why are you upset? You have discovered that the universe of people with whom you share common ground is larger than you thought. That is good news, not bad news.*

That rephrasing turned me into a consensus junky. Most recently, I have been searching for loggers with whom I share common ground, and I have found a few. After that, I'm going to look for miners.

This may strike you as a subjective, self-indulgent, even softheaded approach to Conflicts in Natural Resources Management. I would argue that it is very practical, very hardheaded. I would also argue that the best hope for the West is for all of us who care about the region to find our common ground.

We have already tried to divide the West, and that has not worked. We did that through division of the West into wilderness areas, parks, clearcuts, and mining districts. Zoning the West into the sacred and the profaned has not worked and will not work. We need to figure out how to create a region that is inherently and completely Western.

At the center of this West will be a community of people who love the region and who define themselves by their relation to this land. It will be composed of people whose highest values—right up there with family and God, and way above personal wealth—is their relation to the land and to other Westerners. They will relate to the land and the landscape in various ways—they will hike or ski on it, fish its streams, herd animals across it, cut trees, dig ore, drive through it to sell insurance policies, guide tourists down its rivers, teach or write about it. But the key is that they want to, or need to, live here. Or, for us extreme cases, they will be people who cannot imagine living any place but in the West.

How will this West be defined? What will be the difference between the West and the Midwest, or the West and California? Many characteristics are on my list: clear air; small populations; easy access to rural places, even from cities; lots of small and diverse towns; and a place where the natural landscape overwhelms the man-made landscape. It is will be a place where people, instead of competing with the natural landscape, try to have their work blend in with it. It will be a place where attempts to compete with the natural landscape—by building big office buildings or sprawling suburbs or huge houses—is seen as being in bad taste, or at least out of place. It also will be a place where nature remains a presence—where rocks may fall on the road or on your car, and one of the hazards of driving the region's main interstate highways will be that you may get hit by an avalanche.

Another major characteristic of the West will be a functioning ecosystem: watersheds work; forests are born, live, and die—either by fire or disease; and streams flow according to a natural seasonal rhythm. We will take our living from that ecosystem; we will rent the scenery to visitors by the day or by the week; we will cut some trees, we will harvest some grass; we will divert some water for lights and other modern necessities. We will not smash the ecosystem flat and then reshape it according to some industrial plan; we will work with it. We can build roads, but those roads can not erode for decades or cause the mountains above the road cut to slough away year after year. And we will accept the fact that our main task for the next century is to put as much of the West back together as we can, with the restoration plan being provided by the goal of naturally functioning ecosystems, rather than by plans to maximize water storage and electricity production.

What I am suggesting is a social compact among Westerners, based on a few core values having to do with the land and with the social environment. I see this as very hardheaded. There is no place in my West for those who want to re-create southern California. While I would not ban them, people who measure satisfaction by the size of their house and the number of internal combustion-driven machines they use would not dominate my West. There will also be no place there for people who move from region to region every few years, following economic currents created by corporations or bureaucracies. I do not

know if I would require that people be allowed to vote or own property only after having lived in a place for a year or two. But neither would I reject that possibility out of hand. Nor would I require a loyalty oath to the West, or a regional version of the Pledge of Allegiance, to be recited every morning in every Western classroom. But as best I could, I would create the kind of society that only those loyal to the West would choose to live in. Others could move here, but hopefully they would soon feel out of place and would move on.

These suggestions are intensely practical. People are moving to small western communities from major metropolitan areas, as I did in 1974, in search of the very values I have outlined above: clear air, natural surroundings, a less bruising society, and both order and freedom. But their very rush to achieve these things threatens to overwhelm the small places they have chosen to love, as well as the relatively large Western places, such as Tucson, Albuquerque, Flagstaff, Boise. The danger, some would say the certainty, is that the West will be overwhelmed and will become yet another homogeneous piece of America.

It may seem crazy and Utopian to oppose this suburbanization. Some would say that the only sane route is to become like the Custer buffs, the railroad buffs, or the modernmountain men, all of whom choose to live in the West's past, and to ignore its modern, prosaic present. It may be that the West is about to be submerged. But I do not think anyone can know that for sure. What we do know is that we live in incredibly interesting times—far more interesting, at least to me, than the initial settling of the West in the nineteenth century. As an example, look what has happened to the West despite the power of the Western senators and of the Bush administration. I would argue that, despite his best efforts, George Bush was the environmental president.

Look what happened on his watch. The Two Forks Dam in Colorado was defeated, despite the fact that Denver and its allies spent $35 million to justify it, and despite the fact that no federal money was to be spent on it. Nuclear testing was ended and the nuclear labs stopped producing weapons, going into a cleanup mode. The Central Utah Project was redesigned as a smaller and more environmentally benign project. A start was not made on the Animas-La Plata water project in southern Colorado. The Central Valley Project was partially dewatered in order to help out the fish. The governor of Idaho (Idaho!) proposed drawing down the Snake River's reservoir in order to turn them back into rapidly flowing rivers. Glen Canyon, the dam that "tamed" the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, was itself tamed. And throughout the Colorado River Basin, moves are underway to use dams to mimic the way rivers once flowed.

As I see it, enormous pillars that once held up the traditional West have fallen, and now we have a national administration that will allow change to proceed on a more level, and more rational, playing field. Now, I think, it is possible for us to decide what are the core characteristics of the West and to work to strengthen them. This effort will rest on work done by natural resources professionals, especially those at the land-grant universities, whose charters make them the intellectual centers of work on natural resources.

My hope is that the land-grant universities will help the West create a new economy based on restoration. In particular, we need to high-grade restoration. High grading has a long history in the West, consisting of mining the richest ores, cutting the biggest trees, shooting the buffalo en masse, damming the rivers for their electricity while disregarding the rest of the rivers' properties, and so on. High grading consisted of maximizing short-term gain with minimum investment.

My suggestion is that we now restore the West by performing the easiest, cheapest restoration first. This is possible because we have done so much destruction for so little gain. We have already started doing that restoration in some areas. The campaign to remove Elwha Dam on Washington's Olympic Peninsula is based on the fact that that dam destroyed a valuable fishery to produce a dab of electricity. Elwha is just a start; the Oregon Natural Resources Council has picked out a dozen similar dams that are either unused or produce very few benefits even as they damage stretches of rivers.

On a broader scale, the move to restore riparian areas has energized large portions of the West. Riparian areas were often badly damaged or destroyed for a relative pittance of grass. Better management or outright protection would allow many gullies to be transformed back into functioning streams, with all the natural wealth that this implies. The potential for nonriparian grasslands is also huge. Overgrazing and the suppression of fire have damaged many grasslands and watersheds. We have just begun to turn our attention to the restoration of forests, and the fight over how that restoration is to be done will occupy at least the present decade.

On balance, I think the restoration of streams and grasslands will go much faster because part of the equation, the ranching communities, are much healthier communities than others, like the logging or mining communities. And the health of the land depends on the health of the human land-based communities.

Let me end by discussing what happened in Colorado in the fight over whether or not to build the Two Forks Dam and reservoir in the mid to late 1980s, a dam which would have served the expanding Den-

ver metropolitan area.

In my opinion, the uniqueness of the fight was the decision by the environmental community to provide information, rather than to take the usual stance of saying, "You can't flood this canyon," or "This growth will destroy us."

The environmentalists built a computer model of the Denver Water System. Denver had such a model, but they would not share it with their 50 or so suburban partners on the project, or with the people doing the $35 million Environmental Impact Statement. As a result of the environmentalists' ability to build a model on a PC, and as a result of their general determination to provide dependable information, environmentalists gained legitimacy in the process as they never had before.

Their actions assured both the public and federal decision makers that the Denver area could continue to grow without building the Two Forks Dam. People who testified at public hearings in Denver and its suburbs, and in the rural areas that Two Forks Dam would have helped dewater, were overwhelmingly opposed to the project. In some places, so many people turned out early to sign up to speak against the project that the handful of proponents never even got on the agendas. That outpouring of public sentiment made it possible for the decision makers to veto the project.

But my point isn't Two Forks itself. I want to remind you of what people once said about the Soviet Union. They said that the Soviet Union could never modernize because if it did and if people had free access to copy machines, modems, personal computers and the like, then they would also have access to information and be able to communicate with each other—which would doom the Communist regime.

I suggest that the same thing is true of the rural inland West. Our access to modern communication and information enables environmentalists and other critics to compete on equal ground with bureaucracies that in the past could propose a project, produce supporting data, and claim that only their project would work. Today, as the Two Forks Dam case shows, critics can match groups such as the Denver Water Department in producing reliable data and in communicating their findings to an interested community.

I end with this example because it illustrates that a healthy environment depends on a healthy human community. If we did not have a certain amount of freedom in the West, as well as the information and data-analyzing ability we need to make decisions, Two Forks Dam could not have been defeated, and our Western environment would be in a little worse shape. The Two Forks Dam case illustrates how we can bring into existence Wallace Stegner's wonderful vision of a society to match the scenery.